

THE POOR MAN'S RAILWAY

by Stephen Kurczy

RIDING ON ONE of Cambodia's "bamboo trains" is the closest thing this impoverished nation offers for a rollercoaster ride, but it's loads more fun than any hokey theme park attraction.

Equipped with a five-horsepower engine, the square, jury-rigged cart covered in bamboo mats hurtles over the rails near Battambang at up to 50 kilometers per hour—three times the average speed of Cambodia's freight trains. As the vehicle wobbles back and forth atop metal wheels made from the gears of old bulldozers and army tanks, Cambodian passengers sit back for the commute while foreigners smile and enjoy the wind in their hair.

I look down and notice that some of the tracks' slippers—the supports beneath the tracks—are missing, leaving dips in the rails that bounce our cart into the air. Fortunately the train drivers are experienced, and they claim derailments are rare.

Despite the periodic jolts and jumps, I manage to relax and take in the scenery. Dogs and chickens wander across the rails, and old men sit on the tracks drinking Angkor Beer. Rice fields extend on either side of the line, dotted with farmers up to their knees in fertile mud.

This track, opened in the 1930s, may be in disrepair, but it is still in better condition than the newer section south of Phnom Penh, which opened in the '60s. Because neither route sees more than one real train per week, bamboo trains rule the rails.

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However, this could start to change soon. In June, eight countries agreed to build a Trans-Asian Railway Network connecting China and Southeast Asia. The preferred route from Singapore to Kunming runs through Cambodia—while it is at least 700 kilometers longer than going through Burma and Laos, it is missing the least amount of track. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, which is spearheading the plans, says this is the cheapest option at an estimated cost of \$900 million.

Impoverished Cambodia desperately needs the infrastructure upgrade, which officials predict will increase foreign investment in cement and garment factories along the railroad. Rail transport is cheaper than road travel and also mitigates damage from overloaded trucks. Barry Cable, transport director of UNESCAP, says that easing the strain on Cambodia's roads, some of the world's worst, would not only boost economic development but also reduce energy consumption and improve cargo security. Because of Cambodia's deteriorating tracks, passenger service stopped more than a year ago, and freight usage has decreased dramatically in the last few years, according to Ouk Ourk, deputy director of the national rail company Royal Railways of Cambodia.

To fill the gap, hundreds of bamboo train operators now transport rice, livestock and people. The trains first appeared after the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, a period that left the country's economy

and infrastructure in shambles. Technically, bamboo trains are illegal, Mr. Ourk says, “but we can’t stop it. People are very poor, and there is no other transportation because we don’t have a train.”

According to the Asian Development Bank, the current rehabilitation project will affect more than 1,100 families and “permanently deprive 189...‘bamboo rail’ transport operators of their source of livelihood.” The organization is setting aside \$5 million to \$10 million to compensate displaced families and bamboo train drivers.

Those whose livelihoods depend on the bamboo trains remain wary, however. Lay Pho, a 36-year-old farmer, commutes to market on the bamboo train because his rice field is 10 kilometers from the nearest paved road. “Without the bamboo train, I will have to get a tractor to bring my rice to the road,” Mr. Pho says.

The makeshift trains have also become a tourist attraction of sorts. O Dambong is one starting point for a pleasure trip on the rails, with most hotels and guides in Battambang advertising a 20-kilometer outing for \$8. For that price, a group of friends share a platform the size of a ping-pong table. On a typical Sunday the railway line bustles with tourists.

“A bamboo train is something unique,” says Vanessa Gilles, a 23-year-old French citizen working in Cambodia, as she explains why she convinced three companions to join her for a ride. “Where else can you ride one?”

Thirty years of civil war, neglect and mismanagement have left some areas without even the services of bamboo

trains. A 48-kilometer stretch of rails from the border town of Poipet to Sisonphon disappeared sometime between 1975 and 1985—no officials could explain where they went. In 2006, the Malaysian government donated enough tracks to fill this gap, but they remain stacked in a Cambodian warehouse.

Now, a growing stream of foreign aid and investment promises to rehabilitate the outdated network. Toll Group, an Australian company, signed an agreement in



Vive Armstrong of New Zealand admires the Cambodian landscape as she takes a ride at the front of a bamboo train in Battambang in August.

July to manage the railways through a 30-year concession with a local minority partner, the Royal Group. TSO, a French company, is almost finished with a four-year engineering assessment and rehabilitation design.

Meanwhile, a Chinese firm has be-

gun a \$2.6 million feasibility study on a 390-kilometer line from Phnom Penh to Vietnam’s existing railway.

“Investors and policy makers will be waiting to see how much traffic the newly reconnected line between Thailand and Cambodia manages to capture,” says Mr. Cable of UNESCAP. “If it’s substantial, everyone will go back and look carefully at Cambodia for the last leg of completion,” he adds, referring to the proposed line from Phnom Penh to Vietnam.

A Singapore to Kunming line remains at least a decade away, Mr. Cable says, because of the difficulty and expense of building a railway from Phnom Penh to Vietnam, which would require new bridges over the massive Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers. On the other hand, Ly Borin, deputy director general of Royal Railways of Cambodia, claims the route will be com-

plete by 2015, though he admits no financiers have yet stepped forward.

Cambodians have long expressed hope and made grandiose promises about their railway, and it is difficult to distinguish between fact and conjecture. In 2004, officials announced the start of the rehabilitation project construction. Officials said in 2006 that construction of the Thai link would be complete by early 2008, but mine clearance and emergency repairs did not begin until March 2008. Track construction is scheduled to start in November 2009, and according to the Asian Development Bank, the current predicted completion date is March 2013.

Benoit Bouanchaud, TSO's site manager for the northern section, says the new line from the border town of Poipet to Sisophon, where Cambodia's line currently ends, could open as soon as March 2010. Starting in November, he says, "my target is to lay one kilometer of track per day."

Delays also stem from 18 months of negotiations between Toll Group and the Cambodian government before they signed a management agreement in June 2009. This agreement is still contingent on donors committing all \$148 million dollars of rehabilitation funding, government consultant Paul Power says. Mr. Power also serves as ADB's team leader for the Cambodian railway's rehabilitation. Of this amount, \$73 million in funding is finalized, with commitment of \$42 million from the Asian Development Bank, \$13 million from OPEC, \$2.8 million worth of railway tracks from Malaysia, and \$15.2 million from the Cambodian government. The second, yet-finalized portion of the funding totals \$74.8

million, according to Mr. Power, and proposed donors include the Australian government's overseas aid program, ADB and the Cambodian government.

Toll Group's 30-year management concession includes an agreement to pay \$75 million to the Cambodian government in fixed fees over the first 20 years, plus an estimated \$75 million in variable fees over the second 20 years, according to Mr. Power. Toll Group collects all railway revenues,

but the company must also invest in any new locomotives, cars, facilities and upgrades.

Mr. Bouanchaud, TSO's site manager, has rehabilitated tracks in Bangladesh and Algeria, but neither compare to the decay of Cambodia's rails.

"For the past 20 years the track has not been maintained. It is the worst that I have ever seen," he complains.

For the northern section alone, 400 bridges need to be reconstructed, and 30,000 slippers and 20 kilometers of track are either missing or rusted beyond repair. According to Mr. Bouanchaud, if no action were taken to remediate the problem within two or three years, the railway would become defunct.

Ironically, bamboo trains will help bring about their own demise. Mr. Bouanchaud plans to purchase 20 of the trains, since they remain the best way to get men and material to the work sites. What's more, they are highly economical: Each train costs about \$450 and can carry up to eight tons of material. And the drivers' local knowledge will come in handy too. "[The operators are] really professional—they know every kilometer of the track," Mr. Bouanchaud says. "No one can drive the bamboo train like them." ■

Due to deteriorating tracks, passenger service stopped more than a year ago, and freight service has decreased significantly.